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ABSTRACT

The General Accounting Office examined six employment training programs that had previously been identified as being successful in helping economically disadvantaged adults. The primary objective of the study was to determine whether the programs shared any common practices/strategies that could be credited for the programs' high performance indicators (for example, three had placement rates above 90% and the other three placed at least two-thirds of program completers). The six projects, which were located in Colorado, Oregon, Florida, Nevada, Michigan, and New York City's East Harlem, differed in many respects, including their funding sources, skills training approaches, and client focus. It was discovered that, although the projects were different in many ways, all six shared a common strategy characterized by the following key features: (1) ensuring that clients are committed to training and getting a job; (2) removing barriers, such as a lack of child care, that might limit a client's employability skills, such as getting to a job regularly and on time, working well with others, and dressing and behaving appropriately; and (3) linking occupational skills training with the local labor market by assisting clients in their job search and working to develop jobs. (MN)

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EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

Successful Projects Share Common Strategy

Statement of Carlotta C. Joyner, Director
Education and Employment Issues
Health, Education, and Human Services Division

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Statement

Employment Training: Successful Projects Share Common Strategy

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss how certain employment training projects have been successful in helping economically disadvantaged adults.

The strength of international competition has made us increasingly aware of the need for a skilled labor force and, at the same time, of the large number of individuals in this country who are unprepared for employment. To address this need, the federal government appropriated about $20 billion in fiscal year 1995 for about 163 different training programs.[1] However, the Congress, GAO, and others have become concerned that these efforts may not be as effective as we would like them to be.[2] Legislative changes have been proposed to address concerns about effectiveness, efficiency, and cost by consolidating a large number of federal programs into a limited number of block grants to states. Regardless of program structure, however, considerable uncertainty remains about how to make employment and training initiatives more effective in helping disadvantaged adults acquire and maintain permanent employment.

My testimony today will summarize the findings from a study we are completing, at your request, to see what effective programs seem to have in common. In our report on that study—which will be issued in early May—we identify a common strategy used by some employment training projects considered by state employment and training officials and research groups to be successful in helping economically disadvantaged adults. For this study, we visited six projects that had demonstrated outstanding results, as shown by performance indicators such as project completion rates, job placement and retention rates, and wages at first job.

In summary, we found that although the projects we visited differ in many ways, they share a common strategy that has four key features:

[1]For a discussion of the broad range of federal training programs, see Multiple Employment Training Programs: Major Overhaul Needed to Reduce Costs, Streamline the Bureaucracy, and Improve Results (GAO/T-HEHS-95-53, Jan. 10, 1995).

[2]For example, see Job Training Partnership Act: Long-Term Earnings and Employment Outcomes (GAO/HEHS-96-40, Mar. 4, 1996) and Job Training Partnership Act: Services and Outcomes for Participants With Differing Needs (GAO/HRD-89-52, June 9, 1989). See also Larry L. Orr and others, The National JTPA Study: Impacts, Benefits, and Costs of Title II-A (Bethesda, Md.: Abt Associates, Inc., 1994), Abt Associates, Inc., Evaluation of the Food Stamp Employment Program (Bethesda, Md.: Abt Associates, Inc., June 1990), and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., International Trade and Worker Dislocation: Evaluation of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program (Princeton, N.J.: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Apr. 1993).

(1) ensuring that clients are committed to training and getting a job; (2) removing barriers, such as a lack of child care, that might limit the client's ability to finish training and get and keep a job; (3) improving clients' employability skills, such as getting to a job regularly and on time, working well with others while there, and dressing and behaving appropriately; and (4) linking occupational skills training with the local labor market. Together these features help ensure that clients are ready, willing, and able to participate in and benefit from training and employment assistance and move towards self-sufficiency.

Six Successful Employment Training Projects

All six projects serve adults who are economically disadvantaged, with a range of reasons why they have been unable to get and keep a job that would allow them to become self-sufficient. Many participants lack a high school diploma or have limited basic skills or English proficiency; have few, if any, marketable job skills; have a history of substance abuse; or have been victims of domestic violence.

The projects we visited had impressive results. Three of the sites had placement rates above 90 percent—two placed virtually all those who completed their training. The other three projects placed two-thirds or more of those who completed the program.

The sites differ in their funding sources,[3] skills training approaches, and client focus. For example:

- We visited two sites that are primarily federally funded and target clients eligible under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program. These sites are Arapahoe County Employment and Training in Aurora, Colorado, which is a suburb of Denver, and The Private Industry Council (TPIC) in Portland, Oregon. Both of these sites assess clients and then follow a case management approach, linking clients with vocational training available through community colleges or vocational-technical schools.
- The Encore! program in Port Charlotte, Florida, serves single parents, displaced homemakers, and single pregnant women. Encore!'s 6-week workshop and year-round support prepare participants for skill training. It

[3]JTPA and JOBS are the major federally funded employment training programs for the economically disadvantaged. Projects may also draw resources from higher education or vocational education monies, such as Pell grants or the Perkins Act. Even when a project receives most of its funding from one federal or state agency, its clients may receive support services from other sources. For example, a client may have training paid for by JTPA, while JOBS pays for child care services.

is primarily funded by a federal grant under the Perkins Act and is strongly linked with the Charlotte Vocational Technical Center (Vo-Tech).

- The Center for Employment Training (CET) in Reno, Nevada, focuses on three specific service-related occupations and serves mainly Hispanic farmworkers. Participants may receive subsidized training from sources such as Pell grants, JTPA state funds, and the JTPA Farmworker Program, as well as grants from the city of Reno.
- Focus: HOPE, in Detroit, Michigan, also serves inner-city minorities but emphasizes development of manufacturing-related skills. Its primary funding source in 1994 was a state economic development grant.
- STRIVE (Support and Training Results in Valuable Employment), in New York City's East Harlem, primarily serves inner-city minorities and focuses on developing in clients a proper work attitude needed for successful employment rather than on providing occupational skills training. STRIVE is privately funded through a grant from the Clark Foundation, which requires a two-for-one dollar match from other sources, such as local employers.

Projects also differ in other ways, such as the way project staff interact with clients—customizing their approach to what they believe to be the needs of their participants. For example, STRIVE's approach is strict, confrontational, and "no-nonsense" with the East Harlem men and women in their program. In contrast, Encore! takes a more nurturing approach, attempting to build the self-esteem of the women, many of them victims of mental or physical abuse, who participate in the program in rural Florida.

Ensuring Commitment to Training and Getting a Job

One important feature of these projects' common strategy is ensuring that clients are committed to participating in training and getting a job. Each project tries to secure client commitment before enrollment and continues to encourage that commitment throughout training. Project staff at several sites believed that the voluntary nature of their projects is an important factor in fostering strong client commitment. Just walking through the door, however, does not mean that a client is committed to the program. Further measures to encourage, develop, and require this commitment are essential. All the projects use some of these measures. Some of the things that projects do to ensure commitment are (1) making sure clients know what to expect, so they are making an informed choice when they enter; (2) creating opportunities for clients to screen themselves out if they are not fully committed; and (3) requiring clients to actively demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment.

To give clients detailed information about project expectations, projects use orientation sessions, assessment workshops, and one-on-one interviews with project staff. Project officials say that they do this to minimize any misunderstandings that could lead to client attrition. Officials at both STRIVE and Arapahoe told us that they do not want to spend scarce dollars on individuals who are not committed to completing their program and moving toward full-time employment; they believe that it is important to target their efforts to those most willing to take full advantage of the project's help.

For example, at STRIVE's preprogram orientation session, staff members give potential clients a realistic program preview. STRIVE staff explain their strict requirements for staying in the program: attending every day—on time, displaying an attitude open to change and criticism, and completing all homework assignments. At the end of the session, STRIVE staff tell potential clients to take the weekend to think about whether they are serious about obtaining employment and, if so, to return on Monday to begin training. STRIVE staff told us that typically 10 percent of those who attend the orientation do not return on Monday.

Both CET and Focus: HOPE provide specific opportunities for clients to screen themselves out. They both allow potential clients to try out their training program at no charge to ensure the program is suitable for them. Focus: HOPE reserves the right not to accept potential clients on the basis of their attitude, but it does not routinely do this. Instead, staff will provisionally accept the client into one of the training programs, but put that client on notice that his or her attitude will be monitored.

All six projects require clients to actively demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment to both training and employment. For example, all projects require clients to sign an agreement of commitment outlining the client's responsibilities while in training and all projects monitor attendance throughout a client's enrollment. In addition, some project officials believed that requiring clients to contribute to training is important to encouraging commitment. Focus: HOPE requires participants—even those receiving cash subsidies—to pay a small weekly fee for their training, typically $10 a week. A Focus: HOPE administrator explained that project officials believe that students are more committed when they are "paying customers," and that this small payment discourages potential participants who are not seriously committed to training.

Removing Barriers to Training and Employment

All the projects emphasize removing employment barriers as a key to successful outcomes. They define a barrier as anything that precludes a client from participating in and completing training, as well as anything that could potentially limit a client's ability to obtain and maintain a job. For example, if a client lacks appropriate basic skills, then providing basic skills training can allow him or her to build those skills and enter an occupational training program. Similarly, if a client does not have adequate transportation, she or he will not be able to get to the training program. Because all the projects have attendance requirements, a lack of adequate child care would likely affect the ability of a client who is a parent to successfully complete training. Moreover, if a client is living in a domestic abuse situation, it may be difficult for that client to focus on learning a new skill or search for a job.

The projects use a comprehensive assessment process to identify the particular barriers each client faces. This assessment can take many forms, including orientation sessions, workshops, one-on-one interviews, interactions with project staff, or a combination of these. For example, at TPIC's assessment workshop, clients complete a five-page barrier/needs checklist on a wide variety of issues, including food, housing, clothing, transportation, financial matters, health, and social/support issues. At the end of this workshop, clients must develop a personal statement and a self-sufficiency plan that the client and case manager use as a guide for addressing barriers and for helping the client throughout training. Encore! and Arapahoe have similar processes for identifying and addressing barriers that clients face. Rather than relying on a formal workshop or orientation process, CET identifies clients' needs through one-on-one interviews with program staff when a client enters the program. Throughout the training period, instructors, the job developer, and other project staff work to provide support services and address the client's ongoing needs.

All the projects arrange for clients to get the services they need to address barriers, but—because of the wide range of individual client needs—none provides all possible services on-site. For example, although all six projects recognize the importance of basic skills training, they arrange for this training in different ways. Arapahoe contracts out for basic skills training for clients, while CET, Encore!, and Focus: HOPE provide this service on-site and TPIC and STRIVE refer clients out to community resources. Only Focus: HOPE provides on-site child care; however, all five other projects help clients obtain financial assistance to pay for child care services or refer clients to other resources. Because some of the projects

attract many clients who have similar needs, these projects provide certain services on-site to better tailor their services to that specific population. For example, because it serves Hispanic migrant farmworkers with limited English proficiency, CET provides an on-site English-as-a-second-language program. Likewise, because a major barrier for many of Encore!'s clients is low self-esteem resulting from mental and/or physical abuse, Encore! designed its 6-week workshop to build self-esteem and address the barriers that these women face so that they are then ready to enter occupational training.

Improving Clients' Employability Skills

Each project we visited emphasizes employability skills training. Because so many of their clients have not had successful work experiences, they often do not have the basic knowledge others might take for granted about how to function in the workplace. They need to learn what behaviors are important and how to demonstrate them successfully. These include getting to work regularly and on time; dressing appropriately; working well with others; accepting constructive feedback; resolving conflicts appropriately; and, in general, being a reliable, responsible, self-disciplined employee. Each project coaches students in employability skills through on-site workshops or one-on-one sessions. For example, CET provides a human development program that addresses such issues as life skills, communication strategies, and good work habits. Similarly, Arapahoe helps each client develop employment readiness competencies through a workshop or one-on-one with client case managers. Some of the projects also develop employability skills within the context of occupational skills training, with specific rules about punctuality, attendance, and, in some cases, appropriate clothing consistent with the occupation for which clients are training.

STRIVE concentrates almost exclusively on employability skills and, in particular, attitudinal training. This project has a very low tolerance for behaviors such as being even a few minutes late for class, not completing homework assignments, not dressing appropriately for the business world, and not exhibiting the appropriate attitude. We observed staff dismissing clients from the program for a violation of any of these elements, telling them they may enroll in another offering of the program when they are ready to change their behavior. Program staff work hard to rid clients of their attitude problems and "victim mentality"—that is, believing that things are beyond their control—and instill in them a responsibility for themselves, as well as make them understand the consequences of their actions in the workplace.

Linking Occupational Skills Training With the Local Labor Market

All the projects have strong links with the local labor market. Five of the six projects provide occupational skills training, using information from the local labor market to guide their selection of training options to offer clients.[4] These projects focus on occupations that the local labor market will support. Project staff strive to ensure that the training they provide will lead to self-sufficiency—jobs with good earnings potential as well as benefits. In addition, all but one of the six projects use their links to local employers to assist clients with job placement. While their approaches to occupational training and job placement differ, the common thread among the projects is their ability to interpret the needs of local employers and provide them with workers who fit their requirements.

All five projects that provide occupational training are selective in the training options that they offer clients, focusing on occupational areas that are in demand locally. For example, CET and Focus: HOPE have chosen to limit their training to one or a few very specific occupational areas that they know the local labor market can support. Focus: HOPE takes advantage of the strong automotive manufacturing base in the Detroit area by offering training in a single occupation serving the automotive industry—machining. With this single occupational focus, Focus: HOPE concentrates primarily on meeting the needs of the automotive industry and the local firms that supply automotive parts. Students are instructed by skilled craftspeople; many senior instructors at Focus: HOPE are retirees who are passing on the knowledge they acquired during their careers. The machines used in training are carefully chosen to represent those that are available in local machine shops—both state-of-the-art and older, less technically sophisticated equipment. Job developers sometimes visit potential work sites, paying close attention to the equipment in use. This information is then used to ensure a good match between client and employer.

While offering a wide range of training options, Vo-Tech, which trains Encore! participants, is linked to the local labor market, in part by its craft advisory committees. These committees involve 160 businesses in determining course offerings and curricula. Vo-Tech recently discontinued its bank teller program shortly after a series of local bank mergers decreased demand for this skill. It began offering an electronics program when that industry started expansion in the Port Charlotte area. Vo-Tech also annually surveys local employers for feedback on its graduates' skills and abilities, using the feedback to make changes to its programs. When

[4]The sixth project (STRIVE) does not offer occupational skills training, but it uses its connections with local employers to get clients into the workforce after short-term training. Then it offers continuing assistance to clients for up to 2 years after course completion.

feedback from local employers in one occupation indicated that Vo-Tech graduates were unable to pass state licensing exams, the school terminated the instructors and hired new staff.

All the projects assist clients in their job search. Five of the six projects had job developers or placement personnel who work to understand the needs of local employers and provide them with workers who fit their requirements. For example, at Focus: HOPE the job developers sometimes visit local employers to discuss their required skill needs. Virtually all graduates of Focus: HOPE are hired into machinist jobs in local firms. The placement staff that works with Encore! graduates noted that there are more positions to fill than clients to fill them. They believe that because of their close ties with the community and the relevance of their training program they have established a reputation of producing well-trained graduates. This reputation leads employers to trust their referrals.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared statement. At this time I will be happy to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.

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